

Augusta Chronicle
Sunday, February 24, 2008

Governor's cuts could hurt some seniors in Aiken
An end to free lunch?

By Sandi Martin| South Carolina Bureau Chief
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AIKEN --- James Staley has a lunchtime ritual.

The 67-year-old goes to downtown Aiken to dine with others his age, to hear guest speakers and for Bible study.

Before him, his mother went to the Aiken Area Council on Aging center for meals, taking advantage of the Meals on Wheels program for more than a decade.

It's necessary, he said, because without it, "I don't know how I would make it."

"Once I get done paying my bills, I don't have much left," Mr. Staley said.

If Gov. Mark Sanford's proposed budget goes through, dozens of seniors in Aiken County will be without hot meals, and hundreds more would lose help with their electric bills.

Mr. Sanford doesn't want to permanently fund \$2.9 million for the Lieutenant Governor's Office on Aging, which funded local agencies that feed needy seniors for the first time last year.

Without the funding, 60 to 70 needy seniors in Aiken County will go back on the waiting list for meals, said Scott K. Murphy, the executive director for the Aiken Area Council on Aging.

Also, a new energy assistance program that helped financially-strapped seniors with electric bills will likely be cut completely, he said.

"It's just taking that pot of money from those new clients," Mr. Murphy said.

The additional funds helped the aging council feed an additional 30 to 40 seniors with home-delivered meals.

Another 30 joined the group meals provided for those seniors with transportation.

An additional 470 received help with their energy bills.

Mr. Sanford's office said the proposed cut was because of a tight budget year and his opposition to the way the meals are being paid for.

Ron Driscoll, another meal recipient who leads Bible study, said he's upset at the proposed cut.

"I would rather see the people trying to cut this out get their salaries cut," he said.

Mr. Murphy said his volunteers and workers do a lot with what they have.

Last year, he said, they:

- Delivered 59,292 meals to senior citizens at their homes
- Fed 53,000 more people at their group meals, which give the seniors a chance for much-needed socialization and to listen to guest speakers on issues such as safety and health
- Joined with Golden Harvest Food Bank to deliver 5,520 meals to seniors who are able to cook them or have someone cook for them
- Implemented the energy assistance program, a first for the agency

Aiken County's share of that \$2.9 million -- which was approved last year -- was \$108,000, which the local agency split among two fiscal years. The money runs out in June, Mr. Murphy said.